"AWAY WITH YOUR WHITE MAN'S ART!"

Angel Decora, Sioux, After 10 Years Study, Teaches Her Race on Aboriginal Lines.

Angel Decora, Who Returns To Indian Art.

IS OUR White Man's art a superficial, inadequate thing, after all?

We paint and model with the excellent tools and mediums that an age of invention makes possible—and for what? Principally to imitate nature, which cannot be improved upon.

Would it be more poetic, more romantic, to revert to those curious symbolisms and crude expressions by which primitive peoples sought, not pictorial effects, but to tell wonderful stories, to lead one into fairy pastures of ethereal splendor, where only the keen of mind, the pure of soul, may graze?

In a word, is aboriginal art superior to civilized art?

Ten years Angel Decora, a Winnebago Sioux girl, studied under leading painters and sculptors—men like Pyle and De Camp and Grayson—trying hard to see art in their way, and then cried in desperation:

"Away with your White Man's art; our primitive way was best."

Moreover, she has so impressed the white fathers sitting in Washington who are charged with the care of our swarthy wards, that she has been assigned to revive native Indian art in the United States at government expense.

And this she is doing at the Carlisle, Pa., Indian School.

FOR many years, in fact ever since the government has come to admit that a good Indian need not necessarily be a dead one, we have religiously, consistently sought to turn the Indian away from his primeval instincts, to make him do everything the White Man's way.

But now comes one of the most brilliant, most progressive of the red race, with the authority of the government behind her, and says:

"You can never compensate my people for what you have taken from them. Like the baubles you have given them for the treasures of their handicraft, you now offer them a paltry civilization, with its vices and deceits and its dollar stamp, and in exchange take their poetry, their romance, their art, things utterly beyond value."

When Angel Decora, after ten years of faithful effort to accommodate herself to modern art, went to Washington and laid her case before Francis E. Leupp, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, he was so won by her plea that he sent her to the Indian School at Carlisle, Pa., with a special commission to revive native art.

Not that the commissioner was convinced of its superiority, but he believes in preserving all that is good, and saw slipping away a thing which, once gone, America would always mourn.

It was very much as if we as a nation had lost our A B C's and all that goes to make up our education, and a great teacher came, without chart or book or slate, and said: "Search your soul, and see whether the instinct that is in you cannot call back what is gone."

Of all the hundreds of students at Carlisle not one has been initiated into the mysteries of the old picture writings. Yet their soul-yearnings, their hereditary ambitions, their very physical inclinations, all urge them back, all seek expression in some way different from what they see all about them.

And the method of the Indian teacher has been to gather about her these grown children, to place in their hands the crude tools and materials that their forbears of wigwam days used, and to say: "Here, take them and build; build anything you please; but put your soul into it, and make it beautiful."

What do they make? A casual glance about that big studio at Carlisle reveals only some partly finished rugs on frames, doilies and sofa pillow tops decorated with queer triangular designs in silk thread, picture frames hand-carved in the same odd designs, waste paper baskets, pencil boxes, glove boxes, various articles of every-day use, all decorated by water colors in the curious picture writings.

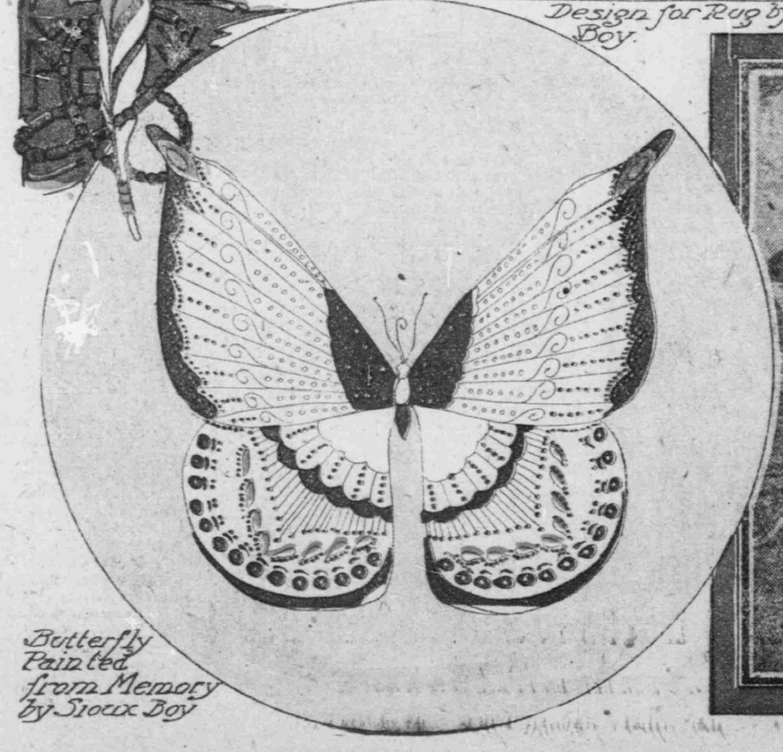
"Real art should be combined with utility," said Miss Decora recently. "This is why the Japanese art is acknowledged by critics to be the greatest in the world—because it is part of the people's life, because they wish to make artistic everything that they use, not for lucre or fame, but because their souls cry out for artistic expression.

"It needs no argument from me to tell you that the white man does not so. His home is a shrine to commercialism, not to art."

For herself she seems to desire no commendation, no notice—she is of the shrinking, bashful nature characterizing the Indian woman—but

Emblematic Monster, Drawn by Pueblo Boy.

Design for Rug by Winnebago Boy.



Butterfly Painted from Memory by Sioux Boy

for the great principle behind her she loves to intercede.

"Don't think we Indians do not love nature," she went on. "We think her so grand that an attempt to counterfeit her on canvas or in any medium seems an insult, and, besides, what is the use, while we have nature herself?

"But the domain of the mind—ah, that is what we make it, and its bounds are limitless. You look at, say, a moccasin covered with beads, a basket, a blanket, or a rug, and say, 'Isn't it pretty?' with a patronizing thought of the patience required by the Indian in making it.

"You have missed its real significance, however. You cannot see the story that is told by every detail, nor do you realize the high conception of art which has taught the Indian to beautify the least important thing used in his daily life."

For another example, Miss Decora referred to a cradle made by an Indian mother. When a white child is born, a cradle is hustled from the store—one very much like that in which the Brown and the Jones baby will be rocked. But the Indian mother makes the cradle for her own child, and into its decoration weaves her mother love, her hope, her joy.

The various ornaments represent the child that is in the cradle.

A round ornament near the top represents the skull or head of a child. A long ornament, consisting of two strips of hide connected by quill-wrapped strips in colors, represents the child's hair. At the lower part are long quill-covered thongs, representing ribs.

Then there are strips to stand for legs. Red represents blood, black the hair of youth, white that of age. Of the sticks forming the framework inside the cradle one is peeled, the other unpeeled. The unpeeled one denotes that the child is yet helpless, undeveloped; the peeled one hints at its subsequent mo polished condition.

There are hundreds of these symbolisms. It is impossible in brief space to explain more than a few.

Some of the most used are the simple characters denoting a person, the heart and lungs, the head, the eye, the human track and the buffalo track, the eagle and thunderbird, the snake and lizard, the fish, butterfly, cattle track, mountain, river, spring, etc.

They look so simple, these markings, and yet one without these centuries of intuition back of him could not decipher them or make them.

There came a little Arapahoe girl to the school the other day and entered Miss Decora's class. "What can you make?" she was asked. She replied that she didn't know.

With a piece of paper and some colored crayons she set to work, and in a little while had made a design for a rug, which she bashfully showed. She had used neither ruler nor compass—none of these artists stoops to mechanical aids—and yet she had a very well-balanced creation, with its centerpiece, its border design and its various strips and sections accurately drawn.

But best of all, Miss Decora discovered in it a beautiful story—it was made up of over a dozen varieties of sign writing—and it needed no words to tell her what it represented.

It brought tears to her eyes, for it told her that the new little pupil already loved her. How did it tell this?

The outer border design was made up of the lightning symbol—a zig-zag line—and the very center contained the figure of the mythical thunderbird.

Now, this little pupil was of the lightning tribe, and Miss Decora is of the thunderbird tribe. So the outer design encompassing the inner one bespoke a real love.

Then there is a Pueblo boy who came and was told to follow his own natural inclination. And the first thing he did was to sit down and draw rapidly, with colored crayons, a sort of prehistoric monster with yellow scales all over its body and a great tail forked at the end and blue wings and a frightful looking head with fangs protruding.

About the nearest thing one could liken it to would be a Chinese dragon.

The boy explained that the scribe of the Pueblo village where he dwelt had once drawn it for him, that it had been painted ages and ages ago on the walls of a cavern where tribal ceremonies are held, and that there was a wonderful story about it. But what that story is he wouldn't tell—that was the secret of his people.

To the Jamestown Exposition Miss Decora has taken some examples of the work, and to the Pacific slope has sent others.

Miss Decora was born on a reservation of the Winnebago Sioux, thirty miles from Sioux City, in a wigwam, and when she was yet a child was picked up by a stranger near her home and taken for a long ride in the steam cars.

When she hunted up her mother in later life she was told that her parents had not given any one permission to take her, so she must have been stolen. Anyway, she found herself at Hampton, Va., where she remained in the Indian School a few years, then went to the Normal ton School for Girls in Massachusetts, and then to Smith College.

Art was crying to her, and she thought she might become a landscape painter. So she went to the Drexel School in Philadelphia, and later studied under various private instructors.

One of the greatest artists under whom she worked for a long time was Howard Pyle, and while yet in Philadelphia she studied with Clifford P. Grayson, the sculptor Grafly and D. W. Train.

Then she went to Boston and studied with Joseph De Camp, Edna C. Tarbell and Benson.

Art Class of Indians.